Improving Interagency Collaboration : Effective Strategies Used by High-Performing Local Districts and Communities

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Improving Interagency Collaboration

Effective Strategies Used by High-Performing Local Districts and Communities

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Young adults with disabilities often depend on linkages and supports from adult agencies to achieve high-quality adult outcomes. However, interagency collaboration has emerged as a major area of difficulty and a critical area in need of improvement for school districts throughout the United States. Based on the input of research participants from 29 high-performing districts and state-level transition coordinators from five diverse states, this article identifies 11 key strategies to enhance interagency collaboration. Results provide implications for the field of transition concerning effective methods for increasing interagency collaboration and, ultimately, improving postschool outcomes for student with disabilities.

Keywords: *secondary special education; transition; interagency collaboration; transition coordinator*

One common denominator among adolescents with disabilities who are making the transition from school to adult life is that they can be considered to have complex support needs, especially when it comes to finding and sustaining employment, living independently, and attaining postsecondary education and training (Morningstar, Kleinhammer-Tramill, & Lattin, 1999). Unfortunately, a major barrier to the effective provision of services is the fragmentation, duplication, and inadequacy of these services and programs (Sitlington & Clark, 2006). Young adults with disabilities continue to experience dramatically lower adult outcomes than do youths without disabilities (deFur & Patton, 1999; U.S. Department of Education, 2001; Wagner, Cameto, & Newman, 2003). The problems most often identified are (a) poor graduation rates from high school, (b) low employment rates after high school, (c) low postsecondary education participation, and (d) an increasing number of youths receiving Social Security benefits and continuing on the benefits rolls. Such reported outcomes have remained consistent across almost 20 years of research (Blackorby & Wagner, 1996; Browning, Dunn, Rabren, and Whetstone, 1995; Hasazi, Furney, & DeStefano, 1999; National Center on Secondary Education & Transition, 2004).

In a time of such poor outcomes for youths with disabilities, interagency collaboration remains a fundamental challenge for educators. Indeed, some have argued that, by definition, transition planning is an interagency endeavor and that without high levels of collaboration, transition services and planning are being jeopardized (Agran, Cain, & Cavin, 2002). Unfortunately, what we know from the research on this topic is that high levels of interagency collaboration remain elusive. Studies have identified several barriers to collaboration, including poor or inaccurate perceptions of outside agencies by school staff, students, and parents and of schools and students by agency staff, as well as nonexistent or ineffective procedures for collaboration of school and agency staff throughout the referral, eligibility, determination, and transition-planning process (Agran et al., 2002; Benz, Johnson, Mikkelsen, & Lindstrom, 1995; Li, 2004). Other limitations have been identified as being inherent to the public school systems (i.e., locus of service delivery and staffing patterns) or the adult service sector (i.e., discrepancies between entitlement versus eligibility and differing services; Certo, 1997).

Other research has indicated that interagency collaboration is a key indicator of successful adult outcomes. In a review of literature identifying recommended practices related to transition services, interagency collaboration, during planning and by formally sharing resources, was

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considered one of four critical elements for improving outcomes for youths with disabilities (Morningstar et al., 1999). Furthermore, in a study of Alabama youths with disabilities, Rabren, Dunn, and Chambers (2002) concluded that variables predictive of adult employment included assistance by vocational rehabilitation (VR), assistance by mental health and mental retardation agencies, and employment at time of exit from high school. Other positive student outcomes associated with interagency collaboration include higher rates of student participating in co-funded career assessment, increased rates of concurrent enrollment in high schools and community colleges, higher numbers of students with disabilities being referred to and serviced by a variety of adult service agencies, and increased rates in attendance in postsecondary education (Hasazi et al., 1999). In another study, Repetto, Webb, Garvan, and Washington (2002) found that services (i.e., community organizations within each district, such as mental health) and supports (i.e., percentage of agency referrals, case management, and transportation) were significantly and positively correlated with the rate of enrollment in postsecondary education. In other words, the stronger the linkages with outside services and supports, the greater the chances of the student's attending postsecondary education (Repetto et al., 2002). Interagency collaboration appears to be a key variable in what happens to youths with disabilities after they leave high school, and it is a critical element leading to higher employment and postsecondary education outcomes.

Given the importance of increasing interagency collaboration and the limited empirical support for effective methods to increase collaboration, the objective of this study was to identify key strategies that were currently being used by high-performing districts. For the purposes of this study, interagency collaboration was defined as a broad concept that encompasses formal and informal relationships between schools and adult agencies in which resources are shared to achieve common transition goals. This study involved a two-phase process that consisted of, first, analyzing an extant database to identify high-performing states and school districts and, second, conducting telephone focus groups within five states to examine effective interagency strategies practices.

Method

Participants

The Transition Outcomes Project database was used to identify high-performing districts from Arizona, Colorado, Michigan, New Mexico, Pennsylvania, with a pilot study in Kansas. Preexisting proficiency levels were calculated from the project data to identify a research sample of high-performing districts. The Transition Outcomes Project was begun in 1999 by Ed O'Leary (2003) and is currently being used by approximately 32 states. The project's methods require a data-driven process for increasing compliance with the transition requirements of the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act. Districts who voluntarily participate in the project are required to complete an Individualized Education Program (IEP) document review of students between the ages of 14 and 21 years old. Districts complete a Transition Requirements Checklist (O'Leary, 2001) consisting of 20 items that correspond to Individuals With Disabilities Education Act transition compliance indicators for each IEP reviewed. Once districts complete the surveys, they use the data to identify areas for improvement. Of the 20 items on the checklist, 5 relate to interagency requirements of the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act.

For this study, state education agency (SEA) transition coordinators agreed to share Transition Outcomes Project data for all participating districts in their state. The data were analyzed from the five project survey items related to interagency linkages, and districts in each state were ranked from high- to low-performing, based on the mean of the mean of raw scores. In total, data from 198 districts across the five states were analyzed and rank-ordered into quartiles, representing raw data from a mean of 3,143 student IEPs.

The 49 districts that fell into the top quartile were then shared with the SEA representatives to qualitatively validate data results. In other words, we wanted confirmation that these districts did indeed have a reputation as being high performers with regard to interagency collaboration. Of the 49 districts found in the top quartile, 33 were selected as high performers after the validation process was completed with the SEA transition coordinator. Each of the 33 districts and communities was then profiled using community classifications based on the U.S. Census categories for describing cities. This was done to determine population estimates and descriptors for each community and thereby ensure a diverse sample of communities across and among the participants.

Of the 33 districts contacted for participation in this study, 29 agreed to participate. In total, 36 people from across the 29 districts participated in the six focus groups. Of the 29 participating districts, 10 were rural, 10 urban, and 9 suburban. Out of a total of 38 focus group and interview participants, 4 participants represented more

than one role (e.g., the transition coordinator is also department chair). Direct-service staff included 20 transition coordinators, 3 blended staff, 3 department chairs, and 1 special education teacher. Administrator staff included 6 state-level transition representatives, 4 special education directors, and 5 assistant special education directors. *Blended staff* refers to a position where the transition coordinator works part-time for the local education agency (LEA) and an adult agency, generally through shared funding (e.g., staff person works 50% full-time equivalency for the LEA and 50% full-time equivalency for rehabilitation services).

Data Collection Procedures

Two researchers conduced six 1-hr telephone focus groups with high-performing districts and seven individual interviews with the SEA transition coordinators. The purpose of these qualitative methods was to elicit the action-oriented strategies and interventions perceived to be effective for interagency collaboration.

The focus groups consisted of open-ended questions and probes, with some questions designed to receive feedback from all participants. Table 1 includes the main focus-group questions. A pilot telephone focus group was conducted to confirm that the questions solicited relevant and comprehensive information. Participants were provided a payment of $25 to $50. The participant fee was increased during the summer collection period to provide an additional incentive for participation. All focus groups were audiotaped. Field notes and peer-debriefing methods were used to ensure a nonbiased data collection process.

In addition to the telephone focus groups, six individual telephone interviews were held with SEA representatives from the five states (one each in Arizona, Colorado, Michigan, and Pennsylvania and two in New Mexico). The telephone interviews ranged from 35 to 60 min and thus served as an opportunity to clarify, confirm, and expand on the focus group results. In addition, the audiotaped interviews were designed to gain insight into state-level efforts related to interagency collaboration. As such, a qualitative interview protocol consisting of unbiased and open-ended questions was utilized.

Data Analysis Procedures

Established procedures were implemented to analyze the data, including organizing and coding raw data and establishing trustworthiness (Anfara, Brown, & Mangione, 2002; Byrne, 2001; Merriam, 1998; Oka & Shaw, 2000). All three researchers participated in data analysis and interpretation.

Organizing and coding raw data. All focus groups and interviews were audiotaped and transcribed. All names were removed for purposes of confidentiality. Transcripts were then imported into a computer software program, Ethnograph 5.08 (Qualis Research, 2001), to categorize, code, and analyze data. After an initial review of all 12 transcripts, the researcher generated a list of codes, categories, and possible themes that emerged from the data. A total of 112 codes were identified and carefully defined. Each transcript was then separately analyzed by two members of the research team. Each researcher independently categorized and coded data. Researchers then met to compare categories and codes and to reach consensus. Transcripts were then coded using Ethonograph and double-checked for accuracy. The code–recode process was repeated twice by the researcher and the research assistant to establish accuracy in independent coding and to identify and establish interrater reliability. Codes for each transcript were then electronically sorted using Ethnograph, and these documents were then separately analyzed by the two researchers to identify themes across focus groups and interviews. Interrater reliability was calculated by dividing the number of agreed-on themes (n = 1,175) by the total number of possible points of agreement (n = 1,250), for an agreement of 94%. When the research team did not agree immediately on themes, the researcher and the research assistant would discuss the variables and come to consensus. Research codes and themes were continually expanded on, reorganized, and deleted. A research log was used to record detailed redirections, changes, and updates to all research project activities. Research documentation was repeatedly reviewed to ensure nonbiased research.

Establishing trustworthiness and transferability. Trustworthiness is described as the level of credibility and validity of a study's research results (Merriam, 1998). Established methods of peer debriefing and member checks were used to enhance the credibility of the research results (Byrne, 2001). Member checks were conducted with a select subset of the original focus group and interview participants to ensure that the emergent categories and themes were accurate and comprehensive. Two representatives from each focus group and all six SEA transition coordinators were asked to review the preliminary research results and respond to a series of questions soliciting their perceptions of the fairness and validity of the results.

Member checks occurred via e-mail. Of the 18 attempted member checks, 13 responded (for a return

Table 1
Local Educational Agency Focus Group Questions

Topic: Focus group questions will target specific areas of interagency collaboration, including professional roles, practices, policies, attitudes, and information that both inhibit and enhance interagency collaboration.

Questions around gaining adult service involvement

1. How do you collaborate with your local vocational rehabilitation services? Let's go around and each comment briefly.
2. Besides VR [vocational rehabilitation], which outside agencies are typically invited to IEP [Individualized Education Program] meetings? Let's go around and each comment briefly.
3. What strategies did you use to get outside agencies involved?
4. What strategies have you used to get outside agencies to attend IEP meetings?
   - When do you start contacting them?
   - How easy or difficult is it to get their involvement? What barriers get in the way?
   - If this wasn't always the case, who were the critical players in making this happen? What did they do? (ex. special ed director, agency director, transition coordinator, guidance counselor)
   - Were any products created to increase outside agency involvement? (ex. family transition guide, resource guide)
   - Did any school or agency policies change? How? (ex. interagency MOUs [memorandums of understanding])
   - What changes have you seen in attitudes of practitioners or agency staff?
5. What about other agencies (not just VR)?
6. What do you do if agency representatives cannot attend?

Questions around the IEP

7. How are the interagency responsibilities and linkages reflected on the IEP?
8. If interagency responsibilities and linkages haven't always been listed in the IEP . . .
9. Who were the critical players in making the change on the IEP? What did they do? (ex. special ed. director)
10. Did any school or agency policies change? (ex. how the IEP meeting is conducted, who creates the IEP, third-party IEP reviews)
    - Were any products created?
    - How do parent invitations include information about adult services participating?
    - How were teachers prepared to add interagency linkages and responsibilities in the IEP? (e.g. extra training)
    - Did you see any change in attitudes of practitioners or agency staff regarding their new roles?
11. How do you create a coordinated set of activities in the statement of needed transition services?
    - Are outside agencies included in this coordinated set of activities? How?
    - Has this always been the case, or if not, what did you do to change this?
12. Have you ever had an instance where an adult agency failed to provide the agreed-upon services contained in the IEP, and if so, what do you do?

Questions around personal changes

13. What differences have you seen in your personal knowledge of interagency collaboration?
14. What differences have you seen in the ways you go about collaborating with adult agencies?
    - Some of you changed your IEP forms and your processes. . . . I'm wondering—is the form more than just a form now in terms of working with adult agencies?

Questions around overall change

You may have already mentioned some of these things, but in case you haven't mentioned something, please say it now. In terms of overall change, you were invited to participate because you have made tremendous changes around interagency collaboration. Thinking back over the time before and after changes were made . . .

15. What were the critical steps involved in making the change around working better and with more outside agencies?
16. Who were the critical players? In what ways did they help?
17. Why were they critical to the process?
18. Were any helpful products around interagency collaboration created we haven't mentioned yet?
19. Were any helpful trainings or courses around interagency collaboration created we haven't mentioned yet?
    - What does the district do so that you can attend training?
20. Did you see any change in attitudes of school or agency staff you haven't mentioned yet?
21. Did any school or agency policies change which we haven't mentioned yet?
22. Finally, what suggestions do you have for other districts trying to make improvements around interagency collaboration?

rate of 72%). Of the 13 respondents, all agreed that the summarized research results were "a reasonable interpretation of [their] perspective." Furthermore, respondents provided clarification of the results, which was then included in the overall summary.

Transferability of the findings is communicated to understand the extent to which the research results can be applied to other contexts (Byrne, 2001). Transferability was ensured through the use of thick description and purposive sampling. As discussed earlier, purposive sampling

was also used, to ensure that the sample was reflective of a variety of district types (e.g., urban, suburban, and rural). The confirmability, or dependability, of the research results was established through the continual preparation for an external audit and a code–recode strategy. This was accomplished by creating an audit trail. As such, an external audit was conducted at completion of the research. In addition, a code–recode cycles strategy (multiple iterations) was used to ensure that codes and themes were truthful and thorough.

Results

Results of the study can best be summarized by describing the 11 key LEA strategies that were identified as being critical for interagency collaboration. The strategies are not listed in any ranked order. Although highly interrelated, these strategies emerged from the data as unique categories of collaborative activities in which the high-performing LEAs were engaged.

Strategy 1: Flexible Scheduling and Staffing

In all six focus groups, scheduling and staffing were mentioned as critical capacities for interagency collaboration to occur. It was clear that the formalized role of the transition coordinator was viewed as being critical to providing transition services. One primary role of the transition coordinator identified by focus groups was to work closely with multiple agencies, often parents, to initiate and secure adult services for youths with disabilities before they exited high school. This required staff who possessed extensive levels of knowledge of eligibility requirements, services, and funding. Participants discussed that, because of the day-to-day demands placed on secondary special education teachers, they should not be the primary coordinators of transition services. Effective transition coordinators should be given the time and resources to provide transition services. One transition coordinator noted,

> There is no way you can sit in a classroom and teach and coordinate and network in the community. You can't do both, and that's why it's important that your transition coordinator serves a role different than a classroom teacher.

Another transition coordinator commented, "I think it's just absolutely imperative that schools give you the time to network and understand what's out there in the community. You can't advocate for your student if you don't know what's out there." Participants indicated that administrators gave transition coordinators flexible schedules to collaborate with agencies and parents on evenings and weekends, as well as to provide community-based vocational opportunities. One transition coordinator reflected,

> I think one of the most important issues is to help some people in public education get out of the 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. workday. . . . I go to meetings all the time in the evenings and on Saturdays, and of course it's way beyond what the union says we should or have to do. But I think the job needs to be done, and the families can't be taking days off work all the time.

In speaking about two transition coordinators in his district, an administrator noted, "They have very clear responsibilities, but neither of them have a set schedule." It was evident through the focus groups and state-level interviews that transition coordinators require flexible scheduling and clearly identified expectations to collaborate with adult agencies.

High-performing LEAs also illustrated flexibility and innovation in the location of services. School staff worked outside of schools, and agencies were allowed into schools. In general, districts that displayed high flexibility in location of services did this through shared work space, community-based instruction, and a focus on accommodating families whenever possible. One participant commented, "Our rehabilitation counselor is just down the hallway from me, just a few doors down. She has an office in our facility, so that makes communication real easy."

Strategy 2: Follow-Up After Transition

It was evident that an assumption among the high-performing districts was that transition coordinators would continue to assist families and students even after they had exited school services. Districts saw the value in collecting follow-up data but were often unsure about how to gather the data and use the information to improve educational services. One participant commented,

> Once [students] are out of school, we call at least every 2 months for the first 6 months, and then it drops down to every 3 months, every 6 months, just to make sure that [agencies] are following through and doing what needs to be done.

The concern about follow-up data (i.e., how to collect the information and what to do with it) was an emerging

focus at both the local and the state level. One transition coordinator reflected on how she had collected follow-up data for several years, but she also mentioned, "What to do with that information became my next question." Whereas transition coordinators conceptually understood why they were collecting data, they appeared to be frustrated at the lack of an outlet for the data.

In addition, families who did not make interagency connections before graduation often came back to the LEA for assistance. A participant noted, "I've probably worked with four or five families who needed more assistance after they exited and then needed to get reconnected [with adult agencies]."

Strategy 3: Administrative Support for Transition

At the local level, administrative support was essential for interagency collaboration to occur. Administrators who valued transition provided opportunities for collaboration by allowing flexible scheduling, compensation time, paid summer training, and substitutes. In addition, all districts that participated in the study had staff designated as transition coordinators. One administrator noted, "It takes a lot of administrative support; it takes lots of begging and lots of thinking. . . . Pay for subs and let your teachers collaborate."

Furthermore, interagency collaboration occurred at the administrative level, such as between the special education administrators and the adult agencies. This most often happened through ongoing meetings and joint training. One participant stated,

> If the superintendents and the assistant superintendents and the directors of agencies are communicating and collaborating, it's going to be a lot easier for us to do it. You have to have the environment or philosophy that encourages [collaboration] or at least stands out of your way.

Strategy 4: Using a Variety of Funding Sources

High-performing districts not only tapped into a variety of funding sources at the local level but also shared funding with a variety of agencies to improve services and training. In all six focus groups, funding was identified as being critical for interagency collaboration to occur. LEAs looked for ways to share funds and resources with other agencies. Some examples of shared funding on the local level, as mentioned in the focus groups, included the following: The LEA and VR shared costs of a summer work program for 30 to 36 students; the LEA shared costs with VR and mental health for community-based work sites; the LEA and Workforce Investment Act provider shared costs for a staff person for a community employment program; the LEA and VR shared costs of blended staff position; and the LEA and Center for Independent Living shared costs of transition fair.

An administrator noted,

> Workforce Investment cut 40% of the programs they had last year, and they gave us more money, and I think that says something . . . that has a lot to do with the relationships that our teachers and the people that run their programs have.

In addition, LEAs regularly pursued external grant opportunities. An administrator commented, "All of our [secondary] special education teachers are part of transition grant development. . . . They have ownership of the grant; they have ownership of the activities." Several focus group participants commented that some of their collaborative activities were grant funded. One commented, "We wrote a grant and it was funded . . . which gave us money to put together a [resource] packet for parents, students, and teachers, and gave us lots of training and lots of ideas." Another transition coordinator said, "We establish trustworthy relationships through grant writing."

Strategy 5: State-Supported Technical Assistance

High-performing districts depended on technical assistance from the SEA to effectively collaborate with adult agencies. All six focus groups and state-level interviews discussed state support as being critical. It appears that in these five states, SEA transition coordinators considered the needs of transition counselors, secondary teachers, and individual communities on a regular basis. They valued local input when designing resources and training. One SEA transition coordinator explained,

> If you look at [the flow of information from LEAs to SEA], it doesn't matter where you are. . . . It's cyclical. It's like a big cycle that keeps going up and down. We're looking at needs from the bottom coming up . . . and [we're] trying to work back through it at the state level and trying to help them. . . . We start to look at building policies and procedures. . . . We go right back to the grassroots saying, "What is the effect of this?"

In general, SEA transition coordinators prioritized local and state needs before developing professional development activities. Clearly, they valued action planning at joint trainings for district teams. One SEA transition coordinator said,

> In the course of 3 days, [district teams] develop an action plan, reflect on the information, translate it down to what does it mean for us and our situation, and then go back and start an implementation of the action plan.

This was a common approach among the five states. In addition, SEA transition coordinators valued ongoing support and training; that is, all six SEA transition coordinators mentioned this as a critical state-level strategy to support interagency collaboration. All the states in this study provided more than "one-time trainings," focusing on additional trainings to meet regional and individualized district needs. One SEA transition coordinator described the process of ongoing support as "a comprehensive approach to professional development":

> We can be very focused with our approach and do it in a manner where we can canvass the state, pull people in, and do that follow-up support because I think we tend to do the slash-and-pray approach. . . . We're trying to get away from that. . . . It's not [just] a conference anymore.

Strategy 6: Ability to Build Relationships

High-performing districts worked with a spectrum of adult agencies. Research participants identified more than 40 types of adult agencies with whom they worked, indicating a high level of awareness and interaction with outside agencies. Many individuals identified the development of personal relationships with staff from these organizations as the most important aspect of interagency collaboration. One transition coordinator explained, "We attend their meetings; we sit on some of the boards that they sit on. . . . We get to know them on a personal basis. I think that is probably the key."

LEA transition coordinators in high-performing districts understood the importance of building collaborative, trusting relationships with adult service providers. One transition coordinator commented, "It's the network piece—making sure that you know where people are and knowing the people in different agencies, and being able to call on them and say 'Hey, can you help me out, I've got a student.'" Common activities identified by LEA transition coordinators included accommodating adult agencies, learning their needs and limitations, sharing resources, and engaging in teamwork. One administrator said,

> Once a community reaches that level [of high collaboration], an outgrowth of that is you get to a culture of commitment and all of a sudden, agencies are making suggestions [to the LEA], employers are making suggestions, and it goes far beyond the scope of one individual. It almost feeds on itself.

The LEA transition coordinators often developed relationships with adult agencies through shared problem solving and goal setting, joint training, and high levels of effort from all sides. In addition, LEA transition coordinators valued simply having the knowledge of the adult agencies' priorities and needs. Research participants valued the longevity of the relationship that they shared with many adult agency representatives. Advocacy was also mentioned as a method of building relationships. Both LEA and SEA transition coordinators expressed "feeling empowered" to facilitate improved interagency collaboration. LEA transition coordinators often challenged adult agencies (VR, developmental disabilities, mental health) to develop or expand programs for unmet needs. Ongoing meetings with adult agencies and transition councils were also used as a way to build relationships, including community organizations such as the Chamber of Commerce, the Rotary Club, and the Optimist Club.

Strategy 7: Agency Meetings With Students and Families

Transition coordinators from high-performing districts facilitated meetings between adult agencies and students and families. These meetings were above and beyond the annual IEP meetings; they often occurred with multiple agencies; and they were not limited to VR.

The transition coordinator or secondary special education teacher coordinated meetings for students with adult service providers (especially, VR). One transition coordinator mentioned, "We have a VR counselor that comes to our high schools . . . and is there once a week or more often if necessary . . . and becomes involved and gets to know the students."

At a minimum, these districts valued having agencies attend the IEP. But more important, they placed value on establishing a good relationship between the adult agency and the student. One transition coordinator reflected, "We involve mental health. . . . They're at the IEP meetings. . . . When we're working out behavior

plans, they're there. They now come to these meetings and want to come. . . . They are a part of it." Districts engaged in early and ongoing relationships between students and agencies by promoting and supporting high levels of agency presence at high schools. Noted one transition coordinator with reference to the adult agencies being in schools, "They're there, and they know they're a part of what we're doing, especially as they move closer to transition and the kids are getting ready to really be more independent."

In addition to having regular meetings with students, adult agencies also met with families. In one district, the transition coordinator noted, "If parents have questions or students want more information, we can set up an appointment . . . and [mental health] will come to parents' houses." In another state, transition coordinators "try to provide transportation for families and set appointments . . . where the parents can meet VR." Several transition coordinators mentioned that it is critical to facilitate meetings with adult agencies and parents and that this relationship is important for postschool services. One transition coordinator said, "We've had greater luck if we can get that relationship [between agencies and parents] established before graduation. . . . The students we're trying to talk into it at the end of their senior year; that was never a good plan."

Strategy 8: Training Students and Families

High-performing districts valued providing information and training to students and families regarding adult agency services, employment, and postsecondary education. All six focus groups discussed, as a strategy for interagency collaboration, the importance of training students and families. Information for students was provided through school-based classes, agency presentations, and community-based programs. One transition coordinator commented,

> We have two classes, an enterprise class that's for the students in 11th grade and a transition class for seniors. They're going all over the place. I've got some going to beauty school and some going to community colleges and a couple in vocational programs. It's just wherever they want to go and VR comes in and does a plan with them and helps with the funding.

Other examples mentioned in the focus groups included an agency staff's visiting classes to explain available programs, a VR supervisor's making quarterly presentations to students' classes, an employer's providing semiannual employment training sessions at a corporate site for students, agencies' providing a life skills course for students (i.e., mental health and a center for independent living), and a university's offering a 2-week summer camp for youth with disabilities.

High-performing districts valued empowering families as a key component for securing ongoing services and linkages. One transition coordinator reflected,

> I think in terms of making the connection work, [a critical feature] is helping the parents develop the confidence. . . . They can take the assignment and run with it, and they understand who to connect with . . . . They build a confidence along with their students to advocate for themselves.

Information was provided to families primarily through transition fairs and conferences, parent visits to agencies, and ongoing agency parent trainings. One transition coordinator noted,

> We would invite agencies in and they would have workshops on an evening where we would invite all parents in our districts . . . and have breakout sessions just like a miniconference, and people would go and gather the information and get what they need.

Many parent trainings were co-sponsored by multiple agencies. One LEA described an annual transition fair for families, co-sponsored by the local center for independent living, developmental disability organization, and LEA: "It's a fantastic fair, and they also have breakout sessions that are open to address certain areas." Another transition coordinator described a parent training that was co-sponsored by mental health and the developmental disability organization: "We just offered an in-service here with them . . . so that parents could find out about how in fact they could get benefits that they're entitled to upon [their children's] graduation." Some districts even commented that they were able to offer child care for families to attend these transition fairs.

Other practices identified by the focus groups included family weekend training, videotaping agency presentations for ongoing use, coordinated parent visits to agencies, and inclusive events for the whole school population. One transition coordinator described a weekend family training on transition, which was held at a local camp and co-sponsored by several agencies. An administrator related how she regularly videotaped agency presentations at the annual transition fair (mini-conference) to share with families as needed. A transition coordinator described how she

> will take parents and ask them to take a day off work and go with them to see four or five programs and talk to the directors of the programs. It's at that point that the parents start to educate themselves.

One transition coordinator described how staff incorporate and invite agencies to their career development days and college nights that they have for their entire population so that their "students don't appear to be separated or isolated from the mainstream services."

Strategy 9: Joint Training of Staff

In high-performing districts, transition coordinators and other LEA staff often attended and participated in joint training opportunities. All six focus groups discussed the importance of joint training as a strategy for collaborating with adult agencies. Joint training was described as training people from various affiliations for a common purpose. People included in joint training were LEA staff (educators), adult agency representatives, families, and related-services school-based staff. High-performing districts valued interagency training to promote relationship building and knowledge building.

Several participants mentioned statewide transition conferences as a key place for joint training to occur. One transition coordinator commented, "Over the past 3 years . . . the presence of all agencies within or at our transition meetings [trainings] . . . has been significant."

In many instances, focus group participants discussed that they regularly attended conferences sponsored by outside agencies. One transition coordinator said, "The rehab people also have their state conference, and I make it a point myself to make sure I go. . . . I think that's just good politics. . . . It's a better relationship." In addition, many training events were jointly planned. One transition coordinator noted,

> The Department of Education, DVR, and the state mental health [developed a joint training] that is available to parents and agencies to use as to how to make referral, when to make a referral, who . . . just all of that kind of information that those of us take for granted.

Some conferences started out as Department of Education–sponsored events but became jointly planned meetings. One transition coordinator noted,

> We have an annual . . . conference, which originally was just a Department of Education kind of thing, and it has branched out to encompass all the other agencies in terms of planning and preparation and who participates, who's invited, and who presents, so it's truly interagency collaboration.

Strategy 10: Meetings With Agency Staff and Transition Councils

High-performing districts often had regularly scheduled meetings between the LEA and adult agency staff, which varied from weekly to quarterly meetings. A variety of agencies (e.g., VR, mental health, developmental disability) were involved in such meetings. The purpose of these meetings was often to ensure ongoing collaboration by sharing information and individualized student planning. For example, a transition coordinator noted, "We get all the agencies to come to that meeting, and we discuss each 11th grader, but without actually saying their name. . . . We brainstorm what ideas we have [for future services]." Another participant said, "You've got to invite them to meetings. You've got to go to their place. They've got to come to your place, and you've got to break bread together. . . . It's a leadership approach."

Transition councils (i.e., local interagency planning councils) were a prevalent format for ongoing meetings between transition coordinators, adult agencies, community organizations, parents, and students. Many transition coordinators described regularly attending transition council meetings. One participant noted, "[The transition councils] are really important because it keeps those lines of communication open and it helps develop those relationships. . . . I think it's imperative that we understand each other's work."

Effective transition councils appeared to be action oriented. In several cases, council members jointly planned a variety of activities, such as youth transition conferences, transition fairs, parent trainings and resource guides. One participant noted, "For interagency councils to stay strong . . . they have to have a clear purpose of what they're doing and why they would do it."

Furthermore, many transition councils shared their activities and goals with other entities, such as local community groups and other transition councils in the state. In one state, "all the transition councils . . . from the different districts in the area [as well as the agencies] will get together once a month." One transition council advocated for earlier vocational services from the local VR system, which resulted in funding being set aside to serve a small group of students in 10th and 11th grade. Another transition coordinator recounted how her transition council presented information about the council to their Rotary Club and Chamber of Commerce.

State support, through ongoing financial support and technical assistance, appeared to be instrumental for

developing and maintaining active and productive interagency transition councils. Districts often looked to states for information in developing and sustaining councils. Several SEA transition coordinators noted that transition councils depended to some degree on state-level support for strengthening their councils and maintaining sustainability. Funding often supported regular meetings, state-level guidance on council development activities, and ongoing communication regarding effective practices.

Strategy 11: Dissemination of Information to a Broad Audience

All six focus groups identified dissemination as a critical strategy for interagency collaboration. High-performing districts were most concerned with providing information to parents and students about adult agency contacts, types of available services, and strategies for securing services. LEAs disseminated information primarily through products, local-level interagency groups, Web sites, mailings, and presentations.

Products were developed at both local and state levels, primarily targeting students and families. Such products included distributing adult agency contact information and service descriptions by developing agency resource guides; manuals on navigating the adult service systems; checklists of potential agencies to contact; and Web sites for families, students, and agencies. LEAs also disseminated information through interagency groups, mailings, and presentations, including semiannual mass mailings inviting parents and students to training sessions about connecting with agencies; transition council presentations to community organizations; resource manuals to students and families distributed via CD-ROM, paper, and the Web; and videotaped agency presentations to share with students and families.

LEAs also received valuable materials from the SEA transition coordinator, who often disseminated information about adult agencies and joint training through interagency groups, Web sites, listservers, conference calls, videoconferencing, online chats, mailing, and e-mail. Furthermore, state-level transition Web sites often contained articles and publications, links to adult agencies, and resources for families. There was a clear value on LEAs' giving products and information to the SEA, which could then disseminate this information statewide, and vice versa.

In addition, LEAs valued sharing information within the LEA, among transition coordinators and teachers. One transition coordinator noted, "For us, it's been important to make sure that we share and utilize each other's brains." Many districts employed the "train the trainer" model and thus sent representatives from the LEA to regional and state trainings, with expectations that those staff would share new information with other LEA staff. One SEA transition coordinator said, "In some key areas where we really need to get the information out well, we do a 'train the trainers' model."

Discussion

This qualitative study identified 11 categories of strategies for interagency collaboration. These strategies emerged from an extensive data set of focus group and individual interviews with local education and state agency personnel. However, it is important to understand the implications of these results from a state and local systems perspective rather than as a to-do list, guaranteed to lead to collaboration. Indeed, one participant commented during the member check that the list of strategies should not be used as a laundry list to interagency collaboration. He indicated that such strategies are insufficient if implemented by a single individual. Instead, in high-performing districts, the identified capacities and strategies represent a complex and interrelated system of staffing, support, knowledge, relationships, and funding.

Our findings reveal that within the five participating states, interagency collaboration occurred at practitioner, administrative, and state levels. It was evident that practitioner-level strategies often depended on administrator support. In addition, the role of SEA personnel to support and facilitate collaboration at the state and local levels was an important indicator of success. Therefore, a critical dimension of interagency collaboration may be the interplay between multiple systems to support effective practices. One contribution of this study is the rich and detailed description of the strategies and capacities used by successful local and state agencies. These results not only support previous research but also add considerable value by explicating strategies that work among high-performing LEAs across five states.

As revealed in this study, high-performing districts used multiple strategies for interagency collaboration. To implement such strategies at the local level, the professional role of the transition coordinator appears to be an important contributing factor. Not surprisingly, these high-performing LEAs had the capacity to permit such strategies to emerge. Many of the local-level capacities promoted great flexibility for school personnel to coordinate services with adult agencies, build relationships with community agencies, meet with families and

students, and promote and facilitate other collaborative efforts.

Limitations

Established qualitative research procedures were implemented to ensure the trustworthiness of the research; therefore, the results can be considered as being illustrative of the realities of interagency collaboration from the communities that participated in the study. Because of the nature of qualitative research, the results cannot be generalized to the larger population, and implications of results should be considered with some caution. First, the initial sample was determined using self-report data from the Transition Outcomes Project. As such, the data that were used to rank districts were not generated or confirmed by an outside source.

Second, more than half the participants were identified as transition coordinators (52%). Thus, the comments regarding roles, responsibilities, and strategies from these transition coordinators were prevalent throughout all the data. Unfortunately, it is not clear whether the high representation of transition coordinators is reflective of an essential staff role required for effective interagency collaboration or if the results are skewed by the coordinators' predominant participation in the research. The remainder of the participants represented local and state agency roles, such as special education administrators, department chairs, special education teachers, blended staff, and state agency personnel; as such, they offer a balance to this potential slant of the data.

Future Implications

A critical informant in this study was the transition coordinator. Unfortunately, we do not know if the large number of transition coordinators who participated in this study accurately reflects a national perspective. In fact, there are no clear data regarding the number of districts that employ transition coordinators, given that the U.S. Department of Education (2003) does not require states to distinguish between transition coordinators and secondary special educators. Given the positive impact that the transition coordinator appeared to play, further research is needed to identify the prevalence of this type of coordination position.

Secondary special educators often have the primary responsibility for transition services, which should include activities related to establishing and maintaining services with adult agencies (Conderman & Katsiyannis, 2002). Although the field of transition supports interagency collaboration as a key component of transition, secondary special educators may not feel prepared for this role if they lack in-depth knowledge of adult agencies and ways to create linkages with adult services (Morningstar, 2004). In addition, activities to promote interagency collaboration may be in conflict with traditional approaches to school-based special education services. Therefore, additional research might be implemented (a) comparing the success among districts with and without transition coordinators and (b) clarifying the most effective roles and responsibilities related to interagency collaboration among secondary special education teachers. A unique area for further research implicated by this study is the importance of relationship building. These results reveal that the quality of interagency collaboration seems to be dependent on building high-quality relationships with community members. In other words, the ability to create linkages between students and their families and adult service providers requires postive school–community relationships. Furthermore, these results imply that the transition coordinator was actively involved in facilitating such relationships. Therefore, additional research addressing the impact of relationship building during transition should be considered.

Probably, the most critical issue to address is whether it is possible to utilize the strategies and capacities to improve interagency collaboration where it currently does not exist. Therefore, an important question to ask is "Can low-performing districts improve their collaborative practices by systematically implementing these key strategies and interventions?" This study provides initial insights into innovative practices occurring across five states. It would be important to consider the long-term results of increased interagency collaboration at local and state levels.

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